FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
May 27, 2001

"Memory and the Peace of God"
John M. Buchanan

Fulfilling one's life means losing one's life in the costly expenditure of love. Wisdom means fixing one's navigational instruments on the promise and vision of a commonwealth of love, the contours of which - dimly visible to the eyes of the world - seem to be rank foolishness ... it means an active, generative, initiating love for those whom God loves ... which is ready to spend and be spent in God's work. Christianly speaking, then, the human calling - the human vocation - is to partnership with God in God's work in the world.

James W. Fowler
Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

MEMORY AND THE PEACE OF GOD
May 27, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 17: 20-26
Revelation 21: 1-6

"The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, ...They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord." (Isaiah 65: 25)

Come, O God, into the quiet of this holiday: in the midst of leisure, may we remember men and women who served their country and died.

May we remember as well, your dream of harmony and peace for your creation.

And may we remember your promise to dwell among us, and be our God—your blessed Easter promise of life in the midst of death, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie
> down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion
> and the fatling together. (Isaiah 11:6)

Those images from the prophet Isaiah are among the most precious in the Bible. But I confess that every time I hear them, I remember something Woody Allen once said: "On the day the lion and the lamb lie down together," Allen quipped, "smart money will be on the lion getting back up."

I also remember something Catholic scholar Gerard Sloyan once said: "The topic of peace brings out the banal in the preacher. . . . After all, what can you say about peace accept that it is a good idea? Sermons on the topic are consistently boring." (*Interpretation, John,* p.177)

And yet it could also be argued that there is no more important topic, no more urgent priority, no more relevant moral imperative in the Bible than peace: the peace of the world, peace among nations, peace between human beings and nature in creation, peace among races, peace within nations and tribes and clans and families, peace between brothers and sisters, peace between human beings and God, and finally, peace of heart—the peace of God which passes all understanding.

I found myself dreading opening the morning paper recently because of the relentlessly awful news it contained about Israel and Palestine, suicide bombings, retaliatory attacks on Palestinians by Israeli F-16 jets, two young boys killed, a baby burned, old people shot, police massacred—

some by accident, some intentionally, some collateral casualties, some deliberate targets. And, in the middle of that, ancient words lept off the page and came alive.

> I am about to create new heavens
> and a new earth . . .
> For I am about to create
> Jerusalem as a joy, . . .
> No more shall the sound of
> weeping be heard in it,
> No more—an infant that lives
> but a few days
> No more—an old person who does not
> live out a lifetime. . . .
>
> They shall build houses and
> inhabit them,
> They shall plant vineyards and
> eat their fruit. . . .
> They shall not hurt or destroy. . . .(Isaiah 65: 17-25)

Those words, which seem so terribly relevant in light of the front page of the newspaper, are at least 2,500 years old. They have touched, in every age, the deepest human yearnings, for safety, security, home and peace. They are striking words because the story of human history is mostly the story of the absence of peace; the story of war, actually. War after war after war, preparation for war, battles fought and won, casualties of war, the aftermath of war, in every single age of human history, leading inexorably to the next war.

New York Times writer, Douglas Martin, wrote an editorial last Sunday on the deteriorating monuments and fading national memory of the First World War, the Great War.
Martin wrote:

> World War I was so vile that nobody ever expected to see anything like it ever again. The lads who marched into fire bombs, mud and poisonous gas, would never be forgotten.
>
> Or would they? In tens of thousands of parks, traffic triangles, and cemeteries in every corner of America, World War I memorials are crumbling faster than they can be shored up by people who consider them sacred, even as the events they mourn, praise and implicitly question, fade deeper into the mist.

And then, Mr. Martin editorialized:

> The Great War solved nothing, proving only that human beings, acting in organized fashion, could kill one another, more efficiently than ever dreamed.

> Most of the American dead were buried near the fields of battle. So their friends and families built shrines near the fields where they hit baseballs and held the hands of pretty girls. These tributes . . . were meant to be eternal.

How well I can remember them. I remember the neat stone pyramid several blocks from my house, in the middle of a small, grassy plot, with a few red geraniums planted by the local VFW auxiliary, and the bronze plaque with names of young men killed in 1917 and 1918, and a newer plaque on the back side with names of families I actually knew, young men just 10 or 15 years older than I was, killed in France, Germany, Italy, North Africa, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Saipan, at sea, 1941-45. On Memorial Day, a blessed day off from school at the end of May, the swimming pools opened, there was a parade in the morning and afterward a little ceremony at the neighborhood War Memorial; a politician made a speech about sacrifice and heroism, the VFW commander placed a wreath and then the exciting part and the real reason a young boy was there, an honor guard, a detachment of army reservists with real rifles, on command firing several rounds of blanks, of course, a salute to the dead, and then a scramble to retrieve the spent shell casings still hot, treasures to put in a pocket and take home. A minister prayed, taps were played by a local high school trumpeter, women dabbed their eyes with Kleenex, men shook hands and we headed for the swimming pool.

The monuments are deteriorating, the *New York Times* reported. 116,500 Americans died in the First World War. There were 4.3 million in uniform, 2,416 remain.

"How do you see what is no longer visible?" Mr. Martin asked, and pointedly observed that, "The biggest shadow memorial may be in Chicago . . . Soldier Field, dedicated to the World War I dead on Armistice Day, 1925. The City Council voted 35-3 in April to let the Chicago Bears change the name of a remodeled stadium to whatever the highest bidder wants."

If peace is important—if peace is the highest priority on God's agenda—and there is no way to argue that it isn't, then, memory of war, the waste, the suffering, the millions and millions of combatants and innocent civilians who have died, the unleashing of the very worst of our humanity: pogroms, massacres, holocaust—is part of it. But so is the heroism, the self-sacrifice, the nobility, the laying down of one's life, the highest and best of our humanity.

The work of peace is hard work, relentless, tedious, frustrating work. And the reason is that when one has been hurt, invaded, violated personally or as a nation, violent response is always easier, always more immediately satisfying.

When a terrorist blows up a shopping mall, victims want revenge. And when revenge is exacted, its victims' rage and hatred is escalated. It is time in the Middle East for a different response. And, thanks be to God, Prime Minister Sharon, just three days ago, ordered Israeli military forces to stop firing live ammunition on Palestinians unless lives are at danger—the first step. It is time for Israel, with the fifth most powerful armed force in the world, supported, equipped and financed generously by the United States—it is time to stop and to move in another direction. To say that is not to condone terrorism, nor is it to suggest that Israel does not have the right to exist with security. It is to say that current policy of immediate and strong retaliation, almost always

out of proportion to the initial offence, often with violent and tragic repercussions for innocent civilian populations, is not only not working, but is making matters much worse.

And it is time, for us, I believe, to acknowledge that on a very different level and in a very different way, our national response to domestic, criminal violence, in the form of capital punishment, is not only utterly ineffective as a deterrent to crime, but morally bankrupt. All it does is satisfy human desire for vengeance. And in the process, contributes to a cycle of violence—this one sponsored by the state—by you and me—that is part of the most violent culture in Western Civilization.

Jesus knew that peace is God's program—God's dream. Yes, he struck back and lashed out at those who defamed the holy temple. But consistently, from beginning to end, his life and teaching express non-violence, reconciliation, peace, and insofar as you regard that life, as a revelation of God, that peace becomes his precious gift and our priority: peace as a political strategy; and peace as a promise for the future.

A generation after Jesus, one of his followers wrote words that sound familiar, reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah:

> "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God."

The writer of these words was, himself, the victim of war, an exile, a prisoner in a hopeless situation.

He was a Jewish Christian by the name of John, living a generation after Jesus. He may have known Jesus. He is the author of the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

His world had collapsed. The capital of his nation, Jerusalem, was gone, flattened, burned, utterly destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans who had finally tired of the protests and political demonstrations and revolts and riots among their Jewish subjects.

So the legions gathered and invaded and chased troublemakers, revolutionaries, and everyone who was out of line, up and down the countryside, killing every last one in the process, cornering a group of refugee Jews in the fortress at Masada, a dramatic high mountain plateau where several hundred people lived under siege for several years and finally committed suicide rather than surrender. And Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the home of every Jewish heart, the capital, the city of David's throne and Solomon's Temple, the symbol of God's love and presence and providence—Jerusalem and its temple were leveled, its citizens either executed or driven into exile. It was Rome's version of the final solution. The Christian community, too, insofar as it was identified with Judaism, was violently persecuted, its leaders either executed imprisoned, or exiled. And so it was that an old man by the name of John found himself far from home, a prisoner on the small island of Patmos near Greece. When you visit Patmos, you can see a monastery on the spot John was thought to have been imprisoned and the cave where he was chained to the wall with the shackles still there. And across the dark, low cave on the other side,

a small opening through which the prisoner could breathe fresh air and see a slice of brilliant blue sky and sea.

John's world had collapsed. His religion, the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David was being systematically stamped out by the most powerful, violent political entity the world had ever known. His new faith in Jesus, the Jewish carpenter, rabbi, crucified by Rome, was also now being systemically persecuted. Christians were arrested, executed or imprisoned as traitors to the Roman state. They were weak, powerless, without resources or friends or much hope.

Old John wanted to write a letter of encouragement to his friends under persecution. He looked out that tiny opening in his prison cell, saw the sky, the sea, and wrote striking words which somehow were smuggled out of his prison and given to the world:

> "I saw a new heaven and new earth."

And he reached back centuries into the history of his people, all the way back to the prophet Isaiah, who had described Jerusalem—a joy and a delight. Now John, in his hopeless situation, has a vision—"a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven."

And then he wrote powerful words that people who themselves were or are up against hopeless odds, would turn to gratefully: prisoner of war, political exile, terminally ill person, son-daughter-husband-wife-partner-friend—keeping watch as a dear one declines and dies, you and I as we ponder the great imponderable of our own aging and mortality.

> "See—the home of God is
> among mortals.
> He will dwell with them . . .
> and God himself will be with them;
> he will wipe every tear from
> their eyes.
> Death will be no more;
> mourning and crying and pain
> will be no more,
> for the first things have passed away."

We read those words at memorial services, at the very moment when thoughtful and sensitive people find themselves/ourselves experiencing the pain of grief and separation and ending, find themselves wondering about the purpose of it all, wondering about the human prospect.

John dared to see a vision of what God has in mind for the creation. That vision transcends the immediacy of the present, transcends his own dreadful situation. That bold vision is of a new heaven and new earth—a new Jerusalem—the promise of a new political order where there will be no more weeping—no more injustice, no more oppression, no more cruelty and persecution,

no more racism, no more homophobia, no more unkindness and meanness, no more war, no more death. God will tenderly wipe the very tears from the eyes of the precious suffering , whomever they are.

The delusion of a frail, dying old man? No—we believe that it is truth: precious truth, powerful truth. Those who die—do not die in vain. The millions who have died in war, the countless millions who die—do not die into nothingness.

How can he say this? How can we believe this?

"Because the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them—they will be his people."

How can he say this? How can we believe this?

Because we dare to believe that in Jesus Christ, God has come to dwell among us and in him all the promises of the past and all the hopes for the future—have come to pass.

Isaiah knew it 500 years earlier.

Old John knew it, and you and I can hold onto it and live in it.

He, Jesus Christ, is our savior and Lord. He is our friend who dwells among us. He will wipe away every tear. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. He is our hope. He is the peace of God.
All praise to him.

Amen

Prayers of the People
The Reverend Calum I. MacLeod
May 27, 2001

Let us pray.

We praise you living God, provider and sustainer of our lives, through whose word is created all that lives and moves and has being .

We praise you Jesus Christ, son of the loveliest Mary, friend of the friendless, liberator of the shackled, who in life and in death, identified with our humanity; who in rising reconciled us to God and to each other; who in ascending is our loyal advocate and merciful judge, omnipotent to save.

We praise you Holy Spirit, God above us, below us, within us, around us; our guide and teacher and comforter.

Three in One, One yet Three; hear our praises and draw near to us as we offer our prayers of gratitude and concern for the world.

We give thanks for this holiday time – for space to relax and enjoy family and friends – we pray traveling mercies for all who will be on the roads, on water or in the air in the coming days. We remember those whose work takes them away from family and home for long periods and pray that this may be an opportunity for reconnection and renewal.

And we do not forget O Lord the meaning of the holiday. We hear the words of our Lord that "no one has greater love than to lay down their life for a friend" so hear us as we commemorate and commend to you those who lived and died in the service of others during the wars which remain in human memory.

We hear the familiar words "They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old", and recognize that among us are those who saw service and those who still mourn the loss of family, friend, comrade. And so now in silence, we remember and give thanks for those who died in the defense of justice, freedom and peace.

(SILENCE)

Bless this nation Lord, and give wisdom and compassion to those set in authority over us.

Bless the soldiers, sailors and air force personnel. Defend them in danger and guide them to serve the cause of peace in your name.

Bless our young people – may they never see the flames of war, or know the depths of cruelty to which humanity can sink.

We pray for the cities and nations which still know war, division, bigotry and hate. Bring near the day when all people will live in peace and in the knowledge of your love.

Bless our friends, and those who were our enemies; comfort those who mourn loved ones today.

And now, rejoicing in the communion of saints we remember those whom you have gathered from the storm of war into the peace of your presence and give you thanks for those whom we have known, whose memory we treasure – and at the last grant that we, being faithful till death, may receive with them the crown that never fades, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose own words we further pray and say together, Our Father…